

## The Call of Samuel

This morning we're wrapping up our series, *The Redemption of Scrooge*. Earlier we heard a reading from 1 Samuel, which featured the call story of Samuel. That narrative records that Samuel didn't know the Lord at that time (1 Sam. 3:7), and "in those days the word of the Lord was rare," (1 Sam. 3:1). Samuel heard the call of God in the silence of the night. How often we miss the call of God in our own lives because of all the noise! We would do well to make Samuel's response, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening," (1 Sam. 3:9), our own as we navigate through the world of distractions around us!

I'd like to take a look at another call story with you this morning, also recorded in Scripture, found in Luke's Gospel – the call story of Mary. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 1:26-38, 46-55. I'm reading from the New International Version today. **Read Luke 1:26-38, 46-55.**

## The Call of Mary

Luke's Gospel brings us to the heart of Christmas. In the first part of our Gospel lesson, we heard the angel Gabriel deliver a message of hope – a call – to Mary, a woman of humble origins. "The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you,'" (Luke 2:28). For those who don't know, this statement by Gabriel is the opening line of a prayer of the Roman Catholic Church. Gabriel says this to her, and Mary, Luke tells us, "was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be," (verse 29).

Next we're told, "the angel said to her, 'Don't be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; His kingdom will never end,'" (verses 30-33). Gabriel gives Mary reassurance, and an amazing promise – that she would bear the Son of God!

Naturally, the young woman has questions – she knows about the standard method from where babies come. "How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'" (verse 34). Gabriel gives her the specifics, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God," (verse 35). Gabriel talks about how God has blessed Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, with a child in her old age. In a way, the story of Elizabeth birthing John the Baptist, reminds

me of the Old Testament story of Sarah giving birth to Issac when she was 100 years old.

### **Mary Trusts God with Her Life**

Notice how Mary responds. “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word to me be fulfilled,” (verse 38). Her humble acceptance of God’s call is profound, especially when we consider the day and age in which it came. In high school, when a classmate of mine ended up pregnant during our Senior year, it was scandalous. People generally didn’t do that sort of thing.

A couple years later, when I found myself in similar circumstances, I know it was embarrassing to my parents. To be caught, putting the cart before the horse, so to speak, can be an unpleasant experience – in my case it was, and resulted in several years of heartache and strife. Today, there doesn’t seem to be so much of a stigma attached to having children outside of marriage, as there was, even twenty years ago. Our society, by and large, is becoming more tolerant of others. Mary didn’t have this luxury.

In those days, if a woman who was engaged – we usually say betrothed – to be married to a man turned up pregnant before the wedding day, that was a problem. Especially if the child wasn’t the product of the soon-to-be groom! By rights, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death on the edge of town for committing adultery. She was pregnant with a baby that wasn’t his. Instead, he had decided to quietly back out of the wedding, and leave Mary to live, presumably with her parents, until the angel talked to him – but that’s another story, for another day!

Mary’s willingness to accept the role in God’s plan shows us an example of surrendering self to God’s will – even when it’s beyond our capacity to understand. It’s a bold, life-risking leap of faith, which she decides to accept. Mary, very literally, trusts God with her life. In doing so, she births Hope for every person who will ever live. The rest of the Gospel lesson we read this morning is Mary’s song of praise. It’s known as the Magnificat, because in old translations the first line reads, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

### **The Magnificat**

In her song, Mary sings about her Savior God doing great things for her, and for all people. She says “He has scattered those who are proud, brought down rulers from their thrones, and sent the rich away empty,” while also “extending mercy, lifted up the humble, filled the hungry with good things, and helped His servant Israel.” Mary praises God for His justice, His willingness to lift up the lowly, and His faithfulness. She’s mindful of her own low estate, and need for salvation. When you look at the ancient church fathers and mothers, they

called Mary, “Theodokos,” or “God-bearer.” I know people sometimes poke fun at our Catholic siblings in the faith, but Jesus is God-in-flesh!

This brings us to the central point of Christmas, one which the hymnist speaks of in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth, The Everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years, Are met in thee tonight.” Jesus’ birth changed the world – and offers the whole human race redemption through His sinless life, His sacrificial death, and His glorious resurrection three days later. In the literary classic, *A Christmas Carol*, we see redemption play out in the life of Ebenezer Scrooge. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come serves as a stark reminder of the consequences Scrooge faces from living a life without compassion and generosity. In a way, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come represents our fear of the unknown, and of the future. This haunting vision challenges Scrooge to consider the impact of his choices on others.

### **Wrestling with Our Futures**

We all wrestle with the uncertainty of our futures, but Jesus reassures us over and over that He will never leave us or forsake us. He is in control. Scrooge’s bleak vision of his future allows us to reflect upon our own choices, and urges us to embrace the transformative opportunity given to us through the manger at Christmas – the in-dwelling Holy Spirit, rooted in love, redemption, and the power to change our paths. Revelation 1:4 says, “grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come,” (NRSV). A God “who is” means that we are not abandoned. A God “who was” means that we are forgiven. A God “who is to come” means that He can be trusted!

In Dickens’ story, what does Scrooge do when he wakes up from his strange dream? He opens the window, finds that it’s Christmas morning, and that he’s been given a chance to change his ways. He did nothing to earn it; rather it was a gift, and he’s so full of joy that he immediately hits the streets – still in his night robe – to make a difference in the world. How often does God give us blessings – wonderful gifts – and we squander them?

Perhaps the entire point of Dickens writing *A Christmas Carol* is to remind us to “keep Christmas well,” or to put it another way, to accept and embrace the invitation given to us by Jesus Christ to receive redemption in Him. Christmas is an invitation into relationship with God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ is born so that God might have ears to hear our wants, eyes to see our need, hands to outstretch on Good Friday’s cross in order to clothe us in His resurrection, and lips to speak the story of Good News – that we might share with the world.

## The Work of Christmas

When Christ's invitation is accepted, we discover that we have been redeemed. We have neither earned it nor deserve it. It is a gift from God, calling us to respond to, and in, the world with love. And so, this morning, as we get ready to light candles, and sing a carol familiar to most of us, let's leave this sacred space with renewed purpose in the world.

I know I shared a poem with you this year in our Advent and Christmastide letter, but I think it's worth sharing again. In the 1940's or 1950's theologian and poet Howard Thurman wrote *The Work of Christmas*:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

May we listen for God's call in our lives, embrace the miraculous opportunities He presents us with for new beginnings each morning, and actively participate in the ongoing work of Christmas – a work fueled by love, justice, and transformative compassion.

**Prayer:** God of days yet to come: Give us the courage to face the future with hope and without fear. While we cannot know what the future holds, we take comfort in the truth that the future belongs to You and that You will one day bring all things to fulfillment. Empower us, as we head into the future, to be witnesses of the One who was, is, and is to come. We rejoice in Your undeserved, but wonderful, invitation to accept Your grace. Help us to live in the wonder of this great gift this season and all year long. In Jesus' name. Amen.